



## City of San Diego Ethics Culture Survey Executive Summary

In September 2006, the Ethics Resource Center (ERC) administered the Ethics Culture Survey for the City of San Diego (CSD) and the Office of Ethics and Integrity (OEI). Thirty-one percent of City employees participated in the survey<sup>1</sup>.

The ERC is a private, non-profit organization devoted to independent research and the advancement of high ethical standards and practices in public and private institutions.

### **Background**

The Ethics Culture Survey was designed to help the OEI create initiatives to strengthen the City's ethical climate. Survey data will also be used as a baseline against which the City can gauge the effectiveness of its ethics and compliance initiatives as they are implemented.

City employees were surveyed to determine their perceptions about ethics and compliance issues in the City. Specifically, the survey measured:

- Expected outcomes of an effective ethics and compliance program, e.g., lower rates of observed misconduct;
- Awareness and usefulness of the City's ethics program;
- Exposure to situations that could lead to misconduct; and,
- Aspects of the organizational culture that relate to ethics and compliance.

### **Key Findings**

Highlights of the findings are discussed below. For relevance and context, some are compared to U.S. averages based on the ERC's *National Business Ethics Survey*® (NBES).<sup>2</sup>

- ***There is a perception that employees are treated differently based on their level in the organization – the most senior employees are perceived to be less accountable than those who are not in management.*** Employees were asked if all levels of employees are held accountable if caught violating the City's ethical policies. Twenty-four percent agree or strongly agree that top management is held accountable,

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<sup>1</sup> A total of 10,992 employees were invited to take the survey; 2,909 online and 504 paper useable surveys were returned. The confidence interval, or margin of error, for the survey is 1.39%.

<sup>2</sup> The National Business Ethics Survey (NBES) is a household telephone survey of a random sample of employees across the United States, and has been conducted four times since 1994. In 2005, ERC sampled 3,015 employees over the age of 18 who worked more than 20 hours per week in the 48 contiguous United States.

30% believe middle management is held accountable, and 58% believe non-management employees are held accountable.

- ***Employees are more positive about the ethical behavior of their supervisors than “top management.”*** For example, 66% percent believe supervisors “set a good example” of ethical behavior, compared to 34% believing that top management “sets a good example.” Supervisors are the primary means for reporting misconduct and are a vital instrument in the ethical conduct of the organization.
- ***Employees are not well aware of CSD resources to help them make ethical decisions.*** Thirty-one percent said they had never or only rarely sought advice from CSD’s ethical policies and procedures or another CSD person or resource when facing an uncertain ethical situation. Forty-three percent said they had never referred to the ethical policies and procedures when deciding what to do about an incident of misconduct. Eighty-five percent never sought help from CSD’s Office of Ethics and Integrity.
- ***Misconduct is observed more than the U.S. average but reported at lower levels.*** Forty-one percent of CSD employees said they had observed misconduct within the last year compared to 28% nationally. Less than half of those employees who observed misconduct said they reported it. The primary reason for not reporting is the belief that no corrective action would be taken. Fear of retaliation was the secondary factor. These rationales are consistent with NBES findings.
- ***Abusive or intimidating behavior is the most frequently observed type of misconduct, significantly greater than the national average.*** Thirty-eight percent of employees reported seeing “abusive or intimidating behavior,” compared to 23% nationally. Other types of misconduct that at least one in five employees observed were “lying to employees,” “e-mail and internet abuse,” “provision of goods or services that fail to meet standards,” “misreporting of hours worked,” “misuse of San Diego’s services or property,” “discrimination,” and “a conflict of interest.”
- ***About one-quarter of respondents felt pressure to compromise CSD’s ethical policies and procedures – almost double the U.S. average.*** Consistent with NBES findings, the most cited sources for pressure are top and middle management. However, CSD employees cite sources outside of the City as their main source of pressure at three times the rate of the U.S. average.
- ***Employees are generally confident that they can recognize ethical issues at work, but some feel unprepared to handle these issues.*** Eighty-eight percent agree or strongly agree that they are confident in their ability to recognize ethical issues that may affect their work; however, 40% say they are not fully prepared to address these issues. There is a potential for misconduct when employees may attempt to behave ethically without the necessary knowledge or skills to do so.

For a copy of the full report, please visit the City of San Diego Office of Ethics and Integrity (OEI) website, [www.sandiego.gov/oei](http://www.sandiego.gov/oei), or contact OEI at (619) 236-7182.